Shamanism

Shamanism is a practice that involves a practitioner reaching altered states of consciousness in order to perceive and interact with what they believe to be a spirit world and channel these transcendental energies into this world.[1]

A **shaman** (/ˈʃɑːmən/ *SHAH-men*, /ˈʃæmən/ or /ˈʃeɪmən/)[2] is someone who is regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of benevolent and malevolent spirits, who typically enters into a trance state during a ritual, and practices divination and healing.[1][2] The word "shaman" probably originates from the Tungusic Evenki language of North Asia. According to ethnolinguist Juha Janhunen, "the word is attested in all of the Tungusic idioms" such as Negidal, Lamut, Udehe/Orochi, Nanai, Ilcha, Orok, Manchu and Ulcha, and "nothing seems to contradict the assumption that the meaning 'shaman' also derives from Proto-Tungusic" and may have roots that extend back in time at least two millennia.[3] The term was introduced to the west after Russian forces conquered the shamanistic Khanate of Kazan in 1552.

The term "shamanism" was first applied by Western anthropologists as outside observers of the ancient religion of the Turks and Mongols, as well as those of the neighbouring Tungusic- and Samoyedic-speaking peoples. Upon observing more religious traditions across the world, some Western anthropologists began to also use the term in a very broad sense. The term was used to describe unrelated magico-religious practices found within the ethnic religions of other parts of Asia, Africa, Australasia and even completely unrelated parts of the Americas, as they believed these practices to be similar to one another.[4]

Mircea Eliade writes, "A first definition of this complex phenomenon, and perhaps the least hazardous, will be: shamanism = 'technique of religious ecstasy'."[5] Shamanism encompasses the premise that shamans are intermediaries or messengers between the human world and the spirit worlds. Shamans are said to treat ailments/illness by mending the soul. Alleviating traumas affecting the soul/spirit restores the physical body of the individual to balance and wholeness. The shaman also enters supernatural realms or dimensions to obtain solutions to problems afflicting the community. Shamans may visit other worlds/dimensions to bring guidance to misguided souls and to ameliorate illnesses of the human soul caused by foreign elements. The shaman operates primarily within the spiritual world, which in turn affects the human world. The restoration of balance results in the elimination of the ailment.[5]

Beliefs and practices that have been categorized this way as "shamanic" have attracted the interest of scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, religious studies scholars, philosophers and psychologists. Hundreds of books and academic papers on the subject have been produced, with a peer-reviewed academic journal being devoted to the study of shamanism. In the 20th century, many Westerners involved in the counter-cultural movement have created modern magico-religious practices influenced by their ideas of indigenous religions from across the world, creating what has been termed neoshamanism or the neoshamanic movement.[6] It has affected the development of many neopagan practices, as well as faced a backlash and accusations of cultural appropriation,[7] exploitation and misrepresentation when outside observers have tried to represent cultures they do not belong to.[8][9]

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Terminology

Etymology

The word *shamanism* probably derives from the Manchu-Tungus word *šaman*, meaning 'one who knows'.[11] The word "shaman" may also have originated from the Evenki word *šamán*, most likely from the southwestern dialect spoken by the Sym Evenki peoples.[12] The Tungusic term was subsequently adopted by Russians interacting with the indigenous peoples in Siberia. It is found in the memoirs of the exiled Russian churchman Avvakum.[13]

The earliest known depiction of a Siberian shaman, by the Dutch Nicolaes Witsen, 17th century. Witsen called him a "priest of the Devil" and drew clawed feet for the supposed demonic qualities.[10]

The word was brought to Western Europe in the late 17th century by the Dutch traveler Nicolaes Witsen, who reported his stay and journeys among the Tungusic- and Samoyedic-speaking indigenous peoples of Siberia in his book *Noord en Oost Tataryen* (1692).[14] Adam Brand, a merchant from Lübeck, published in 1698 his account of a Russian embassy to China; a translation of his book, published the same year, introduced the word *shaman* to English speakers.[15]

The etymology of the Evenki word is sometimes connected to a Tungus root *ša-* "to know".[16][17] This has been questioned on linguistic grounds: "The possibility cannot be completely rejected, but neither should it be accepted without reservation since the assumed derivational relationship is phonologically irregular (note especially the vowel quantities)."[18] Other scholars assert that the word comes directly from the Manchu language, and as such would be the only commonly used English word that is a loan from this language.[19]

However, Mircea Eliade noted that the Sanskrit word *śramaṇa*, designating a wandering monastic or holy figure, has spread to many Central Asian languages along with Buddhism and could be the ultimate origin of the Tungusic word.[20] This proposal has been thoroughly critiqued since 1917. Ethnolinguist Juha Janhunen regards it as an "anachronism" and an "impossibility" that is nothing more than a "far-fetched etymology."[21]

21st-century anthropologist and archeologist Silvia Tomaskova argues that by the mid-1600s, many Europeans applied the Arabic term *shaitan* (meaning "devil") to the non-Christian practices and beliefs of indigenous peoples beyond the Ural Mountains.[22] She suggests that *shaman* may have entered the various Tungus dialects as a corruption of this term, and then been told to Christian missionaries, explorers, soldiers and colonial administrators with whom the people had increasing contact for centuries. Ethnolinguists did not develop as a discipline nor achieve contact with these communities until the late 19th century, and may have mistakenly "read backward" in time for the origin of this word.

A shamaness (female shaman) is sometimes called a *shamanka*, which is not an actual indigenous term but simply *shaman* plus the Russian suffix *-ka* (for feminine nouns).[23]

Definitions

There is no single agreed-upon definition for the word "shamanism" among anthropologists. The English historian Ronald Hutton noted that by the dawn of the 21st century, there were four separate definitions of the term which appeared to be in use. The first of these uses the term to refer to "anybody who contacts a spirit world while in an altered state of consciousness." The second definition limits the term to refer to those who contact a spirit world while in an altered state of consciousness at the behest of others. The third definition attempts to distinguish shamans from other magico-religious specialists who are believed to contact spirits, such as "mediums", "witch doctors", "spiritual healers" or "prophets," by claiming that shamans undertake some particular technique not used by the others. Problematically, scholars advocating the third view have failed to agree on what the defining technique should be. The

fourth definition identified by Hutton uses "shamanism" to refer to the indigenous religions of Siberia and neighboring parts of Asia.[25] According to the Golomt Center for Shamanic Studies, a Mongolian organisation of shamans, the Evenk word *shaman* would more accurately be translated as "priest".[26]

A female shaman, probablyKhakas, Russian Empire, 1908[24]

History

Shamanism is a system of religious practice believed to be one of the oldest and earliest forms of religion in the world.[27] Paleolithic era cave art some 30,000 years old show evidence of shamanic practices. Historically, it is often associated with indigenous and tribal societies, and involves belief that *shamans*, with a connection to the otherworld, have the power to heal the sick, communicate with spirits, and escort souls of the dead to the afterlife. Shamanism is especially associated with the native peoples of Siberia in northern Asia, where shamanic practice has been noted for centuries by Asian and Western visitors.[28] It is an ideology that used to be widely practiced in Europe, Asia, Tibet, North and South America, and Africa. It centered on the belief in supernatural phenomenon such as the world of gods, demons, and ancestral spirits.[29]

Belief in Shamanism has declined and only a few remote tribes still retain the practices of shamanism. One such tribe is the Inuit Tribe in the Canadian Arctic.[30] Another can be found in the nomadic Tuvan (with an estimated population of just 3000 people surviving from this tribe.[31] Tuva is one of the most isolated tribes in Russia where the art of shamanism been preserved until today due to its isolated existence, allowing it to be free from the influences of other major religions.[32]

Initiation and learning

Shamans may be called through dreams or signs. However, shamanic powers may be inherited. In traditional societies shamanic training varies in length, but generally takes years.

Turner and colleagues[33] mention a phenomenon called shamanistic initiatory crisis, a rite of passage for shamans-to-be, commonly involving physical illness and/or psychological crisis. The significant role of initiatory illnesses in the calling of a shaman can be found in the detailed case history of Chuonnasuan, who was the last master shaman among the Tungus peoples in Northeast China.[34]

The wounded healer is an archetype for a shamanic trial and journey. This process is important to the young shaman. They undergo a type of sickness that pushes them to the brink of death. This happens for two reasons:

- The shaman crosses over to the underworld. This happens so the shaman can venture to its depths to bring back vital information for the sick and the tribe.
- The shaman must become sick to understand sickness. When the shaman overcomes their own sickness, they will hold the cure to heal all that suffer. This is the uncanny mark of the wounded healer.[35]

Roles

Shamans claim to gain knowledge and the power to heal by entering into the spiritual world or dimension. Most shamans have dreams or visions that convey certain messages. The shaman may have or acquire many spirit guides, who often guide and direct the shaman in their travels in the spirit world. These spirit guides are always present within the shaman, although others encounter them only when the shaman is in a trance. The spirit guide energizes the shaman, enabling them to enter the spiritual dimension. The shaman heals within the spiritual dimension by returning 'lost' parts of the human soul from wherever they have gone. The shaman also cleanses excess negative energies, which confuse or pollute the soul.

Shamans act as mediators in their culture.[36][37] The shaman communicates with the spirits on behalf of the community, including the spirits of the deceased. The shaman communicates with both living and dead to alleviate unrest, unsettled issues, and to deliver gifts to the spirits.

South Moluccan shaman exorcising evil spirits occupying children, Buru, Indonesia (1920)

Among the Selkups, the sea duck is a spirit animal. Ducks fly in the air and dive in the water. Thus ducks are believed to belong to both the upper world and the world below.[38] Among other Siberian peoples, these characteristics are attributed to water fowl in general.[39] The upper world is the afterlife primarily associated with deceased humans and is believed to be accessed by soul journeying through a portal in the sky. The lower world or "world below" is the afterlife primarily associated with animals and is believed to be accessed by soul journeying through a portal in the earth.[40] In shamanic cultures many animals are regarded as spirit animals.

Shamans perform a variety of functions depending upon their respective cultures;[41] healing,[42][43] leading a sacrifice,[44] preserving the tradition by storytelling and songs,[45] fortune-telling,[46] and acting as a psychopomp ("guide of souls").[47] A single shaman may fulfill several of these functions.[41]

The functions of a shaman may include either guiding to their proper abode the souls of the dead (which may be guided either one-at-a-time or in a cumulative group, depending on culture), and/or curing (healing) of ailments. The ailments may be either purely physical afflictions—such as disease, which may be cured by gifting, flattering, threatening, or wrestling the disease-spirit (sometimes trying all these, sequentially), and which may be completed by displaying a supposedly extracted token of the disease-spirit (displaying this, even if "fraudulent", is supposed to impress the disease-spirit that it has been, or is in the process of being, defeated, so that it will retreat and stay out of the patient's body), or else mental (including psychosomatic) afflictions—such as persistent terror (on account of a frightening experience), which may be likewise cured by similar methods. In most languages a different term other than the one translated "shaman" is usually applied to a religious official leading sacrificial rites ("priest"), or to a raconteur ("sage") of traditional lore; there may be more of an overlap in functions (with that of a shaman), however, in the case of an interpreter of omens or of dreams.

There are distinct types of shaman who perform more specialized functions. For example, among the Nani people, a distinct kind of shaman acts as a psychopomp.[48] Other specialized shamans may be distinguished according to the type of spirits, or realms of the spirit world, with which the shaman most commonly interacts. These roles vary among the Nenets, Enets, and Selkup shaman.[49][50]

The assistant of an Oroqen shaman (called *jardalanin*, or "second spirit") knows many things about the associated beliefs. He or she accompanies the rituals and interprets the behavior of the shaman.[51] Despite these functions, the jardalanin is *not* a shaman. For this interpretative assistant, it would be unwelcome to fall into trance.[52]

Ecological aspect

Among the Tucano people, a sophisticated system exists for environmental resources management and for avoiding resource depletion through overhunting. This system is conceptualized mythologically and symbolically by the belief that breaking hunting restrictions may cause illness. As the primary teacher of tribal symbolism, the shaman may have a leading role in this ecological management, actively restricting hunting and fishing. The shaman is able to "release" game animals, or their souls, from their hidden abodes.[53][54] The Piaroa people have ecological concerns related to shamanism.[55] Among the Inuit, shamans fetch the souls of game from remote places,[56][57] or soul travel to ask for game from mythological beings like the Sea Woman.[58]

Economics

The way shamans get sustenance and take part in everyday life varies across cultures. In many Inuit groups, they provide services for the community and get a "due payment" (cultures), believe the payment is given to the helping spirits[59] but these goods are only "welcome addenda." They are not enough to enable shamanizing as a full-time activity. Shamans live like any other member of the

group, as a hunter or housewife. Due to the popularity of ayahuasca tourism in South America, there are practitioners in areas frequented by backpackers who make a living from leading ceremonies.[60][59]

Beliefs

There are many variations of shamanism throughout the world, but several common beliefs are shared by all forms of shamanism. Common beliefs identified by Eliade (1972)[5] are the following:

- Spirits exist and they play important roles both in individual lives and in human society
- The shaman can communicate with the spirit world.
- Spirits can be benevolent or malevolent.
- The shaman can treat sickness caused by malevolent spirits.
- The shaman can employ trance inducing techniques to incite visionary ecstasy and go on vision quests.
- The shaman's spirit can leave the body to enter the supernatural world to search for answers.
- The shaman evokes animal images as spirit guides, omens, and message-bearers.
- The shaman can perform other varied forms of divination, scry, throw bones/runes, and sometimes foretell of future events.

Shamanism is based on the premise that the visible world is pervaded by invisible forces or spirits which affect the lives of the living.[61] Although the causes of disease lie in the spiritual realm, inspired by malicious spirits, both spiritual and physical methods are used to heal. Commonly, a shaman "enters the body" of the patient to confront the spiritual infirmity and heals by banishing the infectious spirit.

Many shamans have expert knowledge of medicinal plants native to their area, and an herbal treatment is often prescribed. In many places shamans learn directly from the plants, harnessing their effects and healing properties, after obtaining permission from the indwelling or patron spirits. In the Peruvian Amazon Basin, shamans and *curanderos* use medicine songs called *icaros* to evoke spirits. Before a spirit can be summoned it must teach the shaman its song.[61] The use of totemic items such as rocks with special powers and an animating spirit is common.

Such practices are presumably very ancient. Plato wrote in his *Phaedrus* that the "first prophecies were the words of an oak", and that those who lived at that time found it rewarding enough to "listen to an oak or a stone, so long as it was telling the truth".

Belief in witchcraft and sorcery known as *brujería* in Latin America, exists in many societies. Other societies assert all shamans have the power to both cure and kill. Those with shamanic knowledge usually enjoy great power and prestige in the community, but they may also be regarded suspiciously or fearfully as potentially harmful to others.[62]

By engaging in their work, a shaman is exposed to significant personal risk, from the spirit world, from enemy shamans, or from the means employed to alter the shaman's state of consciousness. Shamanic plant materials can be toxic or fatal if misused. Spells are commonly used to protect against these dangers, and the use of more dangerous plants is often very highly ritualized.

Soul and spirit concepts

The variety of functions described above may seem like distinct tasks, but they may be united by underlying soul and spirit concepts.

Soul

This concept can generally explain more, seemingly unassociated phenomena in shamanism:[63][64][65]

Healing

This concept may be based closely on the soul concepts of the belief system of the people served by the shaman.[42] It may consist of retrieving the lost soul of the ill person.[66] See also the soul dualism concept.

Scarcity of hunted game

This problem can be solved by "releasing" the souls of the animals from their hidden abodes. Besides that, many taboos may prescribe the behavior of people towards game, so that the souls of the animals do not feel angry or hurt, or the pleased soul of the already killed prey can tell the other, still living animals, that they can allow themselves to be caught and killed.[67][68] For the ecological aspects of shamanistic practice, and related beliefs, see below.

Infertility of women

This problem can be cured by obtaining the soul of the expected child.

Spirits

Beliefs related to spirits can explain many different phenomena.[69] For example, the importance of storytelling, or acting as a singer, can be understood better if we examine the whole belief system. A person who can memorize long texts or songs, and play an instrument, may be regarded as the beneficiary of contact with the spirits (e.g. Khanty people).[70]

Practice

Generally, the shaman traverses the axis mundi and enters the spirit world by effecting a transition of consciousness, entering into an ecstatic trance, either autohypnotically or through the use of entheogens. The methods employed are diverse, and are often used together.

Entheogens

An entheogen ("generating the divine within")[73] is a psychoactive substance used in a religious, shamanic, or spiritual context.[74] Entheogens have been used in a ritualized context for thousands of years; their religious significance is well established in anthropological and modern evidences. Examples of traditional entheogens include: peyote,[75] psilocybin and Amanita muscaria (fly agaric) mushrooms,[76] uncured tobacco,[77] cannabis,[78] ayahuasca,[79] *Salvia divinorum*,[80] iboga,[81] and Mexican morning glory.

Some shamans observe dietary or customary restrictions particular to their tradition. These restrictions are more than just cultural. For example, the diet followed by shamans and apprentices prior to participating in an ayahuasca ceremony includes foods rich in tryptophan (a biosynthetic precursor to serotonin) as well as avoiding foods rich in tyramine, which could induce hypertensive crisis if ingested with MAOIs such as are found in ayahuasca brews as well as abstinence from alcohol or sex.[61]

Flowering San Pedro, an entheogenic cactus that has been used for over 3,000 years.[71] Today the vast majority of extracted mescaline is from columnar cacti, not vulnerable peyote.[72]

Music and songs

Just like shamanism itself,[16] music and songs related to it in various cultures are diverse, far from being alike. In several instances, songs related to shamanism are intended to imitate natural sounds, via onomatopoeia.[82]

Sound mimesis in various cultures may serve other functions not necessarily related to shamanism: practical goals as luring game in the hunt;[83] or entertainment (Inuit throat singing).[83][84]

Other practices

- Dancing

- Singing
- Icaros / medicine songs[61]
- Vigils
- Fasting
- Sweat lodge
- Vision quests
- Mariri
- Sword fighting / blacksmithing

Paraphernalia

Shamans may have various kinds of paraphernalia in different cultures.

Raven Rattle, 19th century Brooklyn Museum

- **Drum** – The drum is used by shamans of several peoples in Siberia, and many other cultures all over the world.[85][86] The beating of the drum allows the shaman to achieve an altered state of consciousness or to travel on a journey between the physical and spiritual worlds. Much fascination surrounds the role that the acoustics of the drum play to the shaman. Shaman drums are generally constructed of an animal-skin stretched over a bent wooden hoop, with a handle across the hoop.

Academic study

Cognitive and evolutionary approaches: Why is there shamanism?

Goldes shaman priest in hisregalia

There are two major frameworks among cognitive and evolutionary scientists for explaining shamanism. The first, proposed by anthropologist Michael Winkelman, is known as the "neurotheological theory".[87][88] According to Winkelman, shamanism develops reliably in human societies because it provides valuable benefits to the practitioner, their group, and individual clients. In particular, the trance states induced by dancing, hallucinogens, and other triggers are hypothesized to have an "integrative" effect on cognition, allowing communication among mental systems that specialize in theory of mind, social intelligence, and natural history.[89] With this cognitive integration, the shaman can better predict the movement of animals, resolve group conflicts, plan migrations, and provide other useful services.

The neurotheological theory contrasts with the "by-product" or "subjective" model of shamanism developed by Harvard anthropologist Manvir Singh.[1][90][91] According to Singh, shamanism is a cultural technology that adapts to (or hacks) our psychological biases to convince us that a specialist can influence important but uncontrollable outcomes. Citing work on the psychology of magic and superstition, Singh argues that humans search for ways of influencing uncertain events, such as healing illness, controlling rain, or attracting animals. As specialists compete to help their clients control these outcomes, they drive the evolution of psychologically compelling magic, producing traditions adapted to people's cognitive biases. Shamanism, Singh argues, is the culmination of this cultural evolutionary process—a psychologically appealing method for controlling uncertainty. For example, some shamanic practices exploit our intuitions about humanness: Practitioners use trance and dramatic initiations to seemingly become entities distinct from normal humans and thus more apparently capable of interacting with the invisible forces believed to oversee important outcomes. Influential cognitive and anthropological scientists such as Pascal Boyer and Nicholas Humphrey have endorsed Singh's approach,[92][93] although other researchers have criticized Singh's dismissal of individual- and group-level benefits.[94]

David Lewis-Williams explains the origins of shamanic practice, and some of its precise forms, through aspects of human consciousness evinced in cave art and LSD experiments alike.[95]

Ecological approaches, systems theory

Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff relates these concepts to developments in the ways that modern science (systems theory, ecology, new approaches in anthropology and archeology) treats causality in a less linear fashion.[53] He also suggests a cooperation of modern science and indigenous lore.[96]

Sámi *noaidi with his drum*

Historical origins

Shamanic practices may originate as early as the Paleolithic, predating all organized religions,[97][98] and certainly as early as the Neolithic period.[98] The earliest known undisputed burial of a shaman (and by extension the earliest undisputed evidence of shamans and shamanic practices) dates back to the early Upper Paleolithic era (c. 30,000 BP) in what is now the Czech Republic.[99]

Sanskrit scholar and comparative mythologist Michael Witzel proposes that all of the world's mythologies, and also the concepts and practices of shamans, can be traced to the migrations of two prehistoric populations: the "Gondwana" type (of circa 65,000 years ago) and the "Laurasian" type (of circa 40,000 years ago).[100]

In November 2008, researchers from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem announced the discovery of a 12,000-year-old site in Israel that is perceived as one of the earliest-known shaman burials. The elderly woman had been arranged on her side, with her legs apart and folded inward at the knee. Ten large stones were placed on the head, pelvis and arms. Among her unusual grave goods were 50 complete tortoise shells, a human foot, and certain body parts from animals such as a cow tail and eagle wings. Other animal remains came from a boar, leopard, and two martens. "It seems that the woman … was perceived as being in a close relationship with these animal spirits", researchers noted. The grave was one of at least 28 graves at the site, located in a cave in lower Galilee and belonging to the Natufian culture, but is said to be unlike any other among the Epipaleolithic Natufians or in the Paleolithic period.[101]

Semiotic, hermeneutic approaches

A debated etymology of the word "shaman" is "one who knows",[17][102] implying, among other things, that the shaman is an expert in keeping together the multiple codes of the society, and that to be effective, shamans must maintain a comprehensive view in their mind which gives them certainty of knowledge.[16] According to this view, the shaman uses (and the audience understands) multiple codes, expressing meanings in many ways: verbally, musically, artistically, and in dance. Meanings may be manifested in objects such as amulets.[102] If the shaman knows the culture of his or her community well,[37][103][104] and acts accordingly, their audience will know the used symbols and meanings and therefore trust the shamanic worker.[104][105]

There are also semiotic, theoretical approaches to shamanism,[106][107][108] and examples of "mutually opposing symbols" in academic studies of Siberian lore, distinguishing a "white" shaman who contacts sky spirits for good aims by day, from a "black" shaman who contacts evil spirits for bad aims by night.[109] (Series of such opposing symbols referred to a world-view behind them. Analogously to the way grammar arranges words to express meanings and convey a world, also this formed a cognitive map).[16][110] Shaman's lore is rooted in the folklore of the community, which provides a "mythological mental map".[111][112] Juha Pentikäinen uses the concept *"grammar of mind"*.[112][113]

Armin Geertz coined and introduced the hermeneutics,[114] or "ethnohermeneutics";[110] interpretation. Hoppál extended the term to include not only the interpretation of oral and written texts, but that of "visual texts as well (including motions, gestures and more complex ritual, and ceremonies performed for instance by shamans)".[115] Revealing the animistic views in shamanism, but also their relevance to the contemporary world, where ecological problems have validated paradigms of balance and protection.[112]

Decline and revitalization / tradition-preserving movements

Shamanism is believed to be declining around the world, possibly due to other organised religious influences, like Christianity, that want people who practice shamanism to convert to their own system and doctrine. Another reason is western views of shamanism as 'primitive', 'superstitious', backward and outdated. Whalers who frequently interact with Inuit tribes are one source of this decline in that region.[116]

In many areas, former shamans ceased to fulfill the functions in the community they used to, as they felt mocked by their own community[119] or regarded their own past as deprecated and are unwilling to talk about it to an ethnographer.[120]

A shaman doctor of Kyzyl, 2005. Attempts are being made to preserve and revitalize Tuvan shamanism;[117] former authentic shamans have begun to practice again, and young apprentices are being educated in an organized way.[118]

Moreover, besides personal communications of former shamans, folklore texts may narrate directly about a deterioration process. For example, a Buryat epic text details the wonderful deeds of the ancient "first shaman" Kara-Gürgän:[121] he could even compete with God, create life, steal back the soul of the sick from God without his consent. A subsequent text laments that shamans of older times were stronger, possessing capabilities like omnividence,[122] fortune-telling even for decades in the future, moving as fast as a bullet.[123]

In most affected areas, shamanic practices ceased to exist, with authentic shamans dying and their personal experiences dying with them. The loss of memories is not always lessened by the fact the shaman is not always the only person in a community who knows the beliefs and motives related to the local shaman-hood (laics know myths as well, among Barasana, even though less;[124] there are former shaman apprentices unable to complete the learning among Greenlandic Inuit peoples,[60] moreover, even laics can have trance-like experiences among the Inuit;[125] the assistant of a shaman can be extremely knowledgeable among Dagara).[51][52] Although the shaman is often believed and trusted precisely because s/he "accommodates" to the "grammar" of the beliefs of the community,[104] several parts of the knowledge related to the local shamanhood consist of personal experiences of the shaman (illness), or root in his/her family life (the interpretation of the symbolics of his/her drum),[126] thus, those are lost with his/her death. Besides that, in many cultures, the entire traditional belief system has become endangered (often together with a partial or total language shift), the other people of the community remembering the associated beliefs and practices (or the language at all) grew old or died, many folklore memories (songs, texts) were forgotten—which may threaten even such peoples who could preserve their isolation until the middle of the 20th century, like the Nganasan.[127]

Some areas could enjoy a prolonged resistance due to their remoteness.

- Variants of shamanism among Inuit peoples were once a widespread (and very diverse) phenomenon, but today are rarely practiced, as well as already having been in decline among many groups, even while the first major ethnological research was being done;[128] e.g. among Polar Inuit, at the end of the 19th century, Sagloq, the last shaman who was believed to be able to travel to the sky and under the sea died—and many other former shamanic capacities were lost during that time as well, like ventriloquism and sleight of hand.[129]
- The isolated location of Nganasan people allowed shamanism to be a living phenomenon among them even at the beginning of the 20th century;[130] the last notable Nganasan shaman's ceremonies could be recorded on film in the 1970s.[131]

After exemplifying the general decline even in the most remote areas, it should be noted that there are revitalization or tradition-preserving efforts as a response. Besides collecting the memories,[132] there are also tradition-preserving[133] and even revitalization efforts,[134] led by authentic former shamans (for example among Sakha people[135] and Tuvans).[118] However, according to Richard L. Allen, research & policy analyst for the Cherokee Nation, they are overwhelmed with fraudulent shamans ("plastic medicine people").[136] "One may assume that anyone claiming to be a Cherokee 'shaman, spiritual healer, or pipe-carrier', is

equivalent to a modern day medicine show and snake-oil vendor."[137] One indicator of a plastic shaman might be someone who discusses "Native American spirituality" but does not mention any specific Native American tribe. The "New Age Frauds and Plastic Shamans" website discusses potentially plastic shamans.[138]

Besides tradition-preserving efforts, there are also neoshamanistic movements, these may differ from many traditional shamanistic practice and beliefs in several points.[139] Admittedly, several traditional beliefs systems indeed have ecological considerations (for example, many Inuit peoples), and among Tucano people, the shaman indeed has direct resource-protecting roles, see details in section Ecological aspect.

Today, shamanism survives primarily among indigenous peoples. Shamanic practices continue today in the tundras, jungles, deserts, and other rural areas, and even in cities, towns, suburbs, and shantytowns all over the world. This is especially true for Africa and South America, where "mestizo shamanism" is widespread.

Regional variations

Asia

Vietnam

Shamanism is part of the Vietnamese religion of Đạo Mẫu. In Vietnam, this ritual practice is called lên đồng or also known as *hầu bóng*, or *hầu đồng*, sessions involve a number of artistic elements, such as music, singing, dance and the use of costumes.

Hmong shamanism

The Hmong people, as an ancient people of China with a 5,000-year history, continue to maintain and practice its form of shamanism known as Ua Neeb in mainland Asia. At the end of the Vietnam War, some 300,000 Hmong have been settled across the globe. They have continued to practice Ua Neeb in various countries in North and South America, Europe and Australia. In the U.S., the Hmong shaman practitioner is known as*Txiv Neeb* has been licensed by many hospitals in California as being part of the medical health team to treat patients in hospital. This revival of Ua Neeb in the West has been brought great success and has been hailed in the media as "doctor for the disease, shaman for the soul".

Being a Hmong shaman represents a true vocation, chosen by the shaman god, Sivyis.[140] The shaman's main job is to bring harmony to the individual, their family, and their community within their environment by performing various rituals (usually through trance).

Animal sacrifice has been part of the Hmong shamanic practice for the past 5,000 years. Contrary to the belief of many Westerners, the Hmong practice of using animals in shamanic practice is performed with great respect. After the Vietnam War, over 200,000 Hmong were resettled in the United States and shamanism is still part of the Hmong culture. Due the colliding of culture and the law, as Professor Alison Dundes Renteln, a political science professor at the University of Southern California and author of *The Cultural Defense*, a book that examines the influence of such cases on U.S. courts, once said, "We say that as a society we welcome diversity, and in fact that we embrace it ... In practice, it's not that easy".[141]

The Hmong believe that all things on Earth have a soul (or multiple souls), and those souls are treated as equal and can be considered interchangeable. When a person is sick due to his soul being lost, or captured by wild spirit, it is necessary to ask for and receive permission of that animal, whether it is a chicken, pig, dog, goat or any other animals required, to use its soul for an exchange with the afflicted person's soul for a period of 12 months. At the end of that period, during the Hmong New Year, the shaman would perform a special ritual to release the soul of that animal and send it off to the world beyond. As part of his service to mankind, the animal soul is sent off to be reincarnated into a higher form of animal, or even to become a member of a god's family (ua Fuab Tais Ntuj tus tub, tus ntxhais) to live a life of luxury, free of the suffering as an animal. Hence, being asked to perform this duty (what is known in the West as "animal sacrifice") is one of the greatest honors for that animal, to be able to serve mankind. The Hmong of

southeast Guizhou will cover the rooster with a piece of red cloth and then hold it up to worship and sacrifice to the Heaven and the Earth before the sacred cockfight.[142] In a 2010 trial of a Sheboygan Wisconsin Hmong who was charged with staging a cockfight, it was stated that the roosters were "kept for both food and religious purposes",[143] and the case was followed by an acquittal.[143]

In addition to the spiritual dimension, Hmong shaman attempt to treat many physical illnesses through use of the text of sacred words (khawv koob).

Indonesia

Throughout the villages and towns of Indonesia, local healers known as dukun practice diverse activities from massage, bonesetting, midwivery, herbal medicine, spirit mediumship and divination.

Indonesian *dukun*

Japan

Shamanism is part of the indigenous Ainu religion and Japanese religion of Shinto, although Shinto is distinct in that it is shamanism for an agricultural society. Since the early middle-ages Shinto has been influenced by and syncretized with Buddhism and other elements of continental East Asian culture. The book "*Occult Japan: Shinto, Shamanism and the Way of the Gods*" by Percival Lowell delves further into researching Japanese shamanism or Shintoism.[144] The book *Japan Through the Looking Glass: Shaman to Shinto* uncovers the extraordinary aspects of Japanese beliefs.[145][146]

Korea

Shamanism is still practiced in North and South Korea. In the south, shaman women are known as *mudangs*, while male shamans are referred to as *baksoo mudangs*.

A person can become a shaman through hereditary title or through natural ability. Shamans are consulted in contemporary society for financial and marital decisions.

Malaysia

Shamanism were also practiced among the Malay community in Malay Peninsula and indigenous people in Sabah and Sarawak. People who practice shamanism in the country are generally called as *bomoh* or *pawang* in the Peninsula.[147][148] In Sabah, the Bobohizan is the main shaman among the Kadazan-Dusun indigenous community.[149]

Bobohizan of North Borneo, circa 1921.

Mongolia

Mongolian classics, such as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, provide details about male and female shamans serving as exorcists, healers, rainmakers, oneiromancers, soothsayers, and officials. Shamanic practices continue in present-day Mongolian culture.[150][151][152][153][154]

The spiritual hierarchy in clan-based Mongolian society was complex. The highest group consisted of 99 *tngri* (55 of them benevolent or "white" and 44 terrifying or "black"), 77 *natigai* or "earth-mothers", besides others. The *tngri* were called upon only by leaders and great shamans and were common to all the clans. After these, three groups of ancestral spirits dominated. The "Lord-Spirits" were the souls of clan leaders to whom any member of a clan could appeal for physical or spiritual help. The "Protector-

Spirits" included the souls of great shamans (*ĵigari*) and shamanesses (*abĵiya*). The "Guardian-Spirits" were made up of the souls of smaller shamans (*böge*) and shamanesses (*idugan*) and were associated with a specific locality (including mountains, rivers, etc.) in the clan's territory.[155]

Mongolian Shaman performing rituals, 3rd March 2019. At Khovsogol lake worship, during the "Blue Pearl" event in Mongolia.

In the 1990s, a form of Mongolian neo-shamanism was created which has given a more modern approach to shamanism. Among the Buryat Mongols, who live in Mongolia and Russia, the proliferation of shamans since 1990 is a core aspect of a larger struggle for the Buryats to reestablish their historical and genetic roots, as has been documented extensively by Ippei Shimamura, an anthropologist at the University of Shiga Prefecture in Japan.[156] Some Mongolian shamans are now making a business out of their profession and even have offices in the larger towns. At these businesses, a shaman generally heads the organization and performs services such as healing, fortunetelling, and solving all kinds of problems.[157] Although the initial enthusiasm for the revival of Mongol shamanism in the post-communist/post-1990 era led to an openness to all interested visitors, the situation has changed among those Mongols seeking to protect the essential ethnic or national basis of their practices. In recent years many associations of Mongol shamans have become wary of Western "core" or "neo" or "New Age" shamans and have restricted access to only to Mongols and Western scholars. One such event, organized by Jargalsaichan, the head of the Corporate Union of Mongolian Shamans, was the 21 June 2017 Ulaan Tergel (summer solstice) celebration held near midnight on the steppes about 20 km outside Ulaanbaatar. Although a private event, two Western psychologist scholars of shamanism, Richard Noll and Leonard George were allowed to observe, photograph and post video of the event to YouTube.[158]

Philippines

Babaylans ((also balian or katalonan, among many other indigenous names) were shamans of the various ethnic groups of the pre-colonial Philippine islands. These shamans specialized in harnessing the unlimited powers of nature[159] and were almost always women or feminized men (*asog* or *bayok*). They were believed to have spirit guides, by which they could contact and interact with the spirits and deities (*anito* or *diwata*) and the spirit world. Their primary role were as mediums during *pag-anito* séance rituals. There were also various subtypes of *babaylan* specializing in the arts of healing and herbalism, divination, and sorcery.[160]

1922: a shaman of the Itneg people renewing an offering to the spirit (*anito*) of a warrior's *kalasag* shield

Babaylan were highly respected members of the community, on par with the pre-colonial noble class.[161][162][163] In the absence of the datu (head of the domain), the babaylan takes in the role of interim head of the domain.[159]

They were powerful ritual specialists with the capability to influence the weather, and tap the various spirits in nature. Babaylans were held in such high esteem because of their ability to negate the dark magic of an evil datu or spirit and heal the sick or the wounded. Among the powers of the babaylan was to heal the sick, ensure a safe pregnancy and child birth, and lead rituals with offerings to the various divinities. The babaylans were well versed in herb lore, and was able to create remedies, antidotes, and potions from various roots and seeds. They used these to treat the sick or to aid an ally datu in bringing down an enemy, hence, the babaylans were also known for their specialization in medical and divine combat.[159]

A performer depicting a shaman in a recent Babaylan Festival of Bago, Negros Occidental

Their influence waned when most of the ethnic groups of the Philippines were gradually converted to Islam and forcefully converted to Catholicism. Under the Spanish Empire, *babaylan* were often maligned and falsely accused as witches and "priests of the devil" and were persecuted harshly by the Spanish clergy. The Spanish burned down everything they associated as connected to the native people's indigenous religion (including shrines such as the dambana), even forcefully ordering native children to defecate on their own god's idols.[159] In modern Philippine society, their roles have largely been taken over by folk healers, which are now predominantly male, while some are still being falsely accused as 'witches', which has been inputted by Spanish colonialism.[164][165][166] In areas where the people have not been converted into Muslims or Christians, notably ancestral domains of indigenous peoples, the shamans and their cultural traits have continued to exist with their respective communities, although these shamans and their practices are being slowly diluted by Christian religions which continue to interfere with their life-ways.[159]

Siberia and North Asia

Siberia is regarded as the *locus classicus* of shamanism.[167] The area is inhabited by many different ethnic groups, and many of its peoples observe shamanistic practices, even in modern times. Many classical ethnographic sources of "shamanism" were recorded among Siberian peoples.

Ainu bear sacrifice. Japanese scroll painting, circa 1870.

Manchu Shamanism is one of very few Shamanist traditions which held official status into the modern era, by becoming one of the imperial cults of the Qing dynasty of China (alongside Buddhism, Taoism and traditional Heaven worship). The Palace of Earthly Tranquility, one of the principal halls of the Forbidden City in Beijing, was partly dedicated to Shamanistic rituals. The ritual set-up is still preserved *in situ* today.

Shaman in southern Siberia, 2014

Among the Siberian Chukchis peoples, a shaman is interpreted as someone who is possessed by a spirit, who demands that someone assume the shamanic role for their people. Among the Buryat, there is a ritual known as *shanar*[168] whereby a candidate is consecrated as shaman by another already-established shaman.

Among several Samoyedic peoples, shamanism was a living tradition also in modern times, especially at groups living in isolation, until recent times (Nganasans).[169] The last notable Nganasan shaman's seances could be recorded on film in the 1970s.[131][169]

When the People's Republic of China was formed in 1949 and the border with Russian Siberia was formally sealed, many nomadic Tungus groups (including the Evenki) that practiced shamanism were confined in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. The last shaman of the Oroqen, Chuonnasuan (Meng Jinfu), died in October 2000.[170]

In many other cases, shamanism was in decline even at the beginning of the 20th century, for instance, among the Roma.[38]

Central Asia

Geographic influences on Central Asian shamanism

Geographical factors heavily influence the character and development of the religion, myths, rituals and epics of Central Asia. While in other parts of the world, religious rituals are primarily used to promote agricultural prosperity, here they were used to ensure success in hunting and breeding livestock. Animals are one of the most important elements of indigenous religion in Central Asia because of the role they play in the survival of the nomadic civilizations of the steppes as well as sedentary populations living on land not conducive to agriculture. Shamans wore animal skins and feathers and underwent transformations into animals during spiritual journeys. In addition, animals served as humans' guides, rescuers, ancestors, totems and sacrificial victims.[171] As a religion of nature, shamanism throughout Central Asia held particular reverence for the relations between sky, earth and water and believed in the mystical importance of trees and mountains. Shamanism in Central Asia also places a strong emphasis on the opposition between

summer and winter, corresponding to the huge differences in temperature common in the region. The harsh conditions and poverty caused by the extreme temperatures drove Central Asian nomads throughout history to pursue militaristic goals against their sedentary neighbors. This military background can be seen in the reverence for horses and warriors within many indigenous religions.[172]

Oroqen shaman, northern China

Common shamanic practices and beliefs shared among Central Asians

Central Asian shamans served as sacred intermediaries between the human and spirit world. In this role they took on tasks such as healing, divination, appealing to ancestors, manipulating the elements, leading lost souls and officiating public religious rituals. The shamanic séance served as a public display of the shaman's journey to the spirit world and usually involved intense trances, drumming, dancing, chanting, elaborate costumes, miraculous displays of physical strength, and audience involvement. The goal of these séances ranged from recovering the lost soul of a sick patient and divining the future to controlling the weather and finding a lost person or thing. The use of sleight-of-hand tricks, ventriloquism, and hypnosis were common in these rituals but did not explain the more impressive feats and actual cures accomplished by shamans.[173]

Shamans perform in a "state of ecstasy" deliberately induced by an effort of will. Reaching this altered state of consciousness required great mental exertion, concentration and strict self-discipline. Mental and physical preparation included long periods of silent meditation, fasting, and smoking. In this state, skilled shamans employ capabilities that the human organism cannot accomplish in the ordinary state. Shamans in ecstasy displayed unusual physical strength, the ability to withstand extreme temperatures, the bearing of stabbing and cutting without pain, and the heightened receptivity of the sense organs. Shamans made use of intoxicating substances and hallucinogens, especially mukhomor mushrooms and alcohol, as a means of hastening the attainment of ecstasy.[174]

The use of purification by fire is an important element of the shamanic tradition dating back as early as the 6th century. People and things connected with the dead had to be purified by passing between fires. These purifications were complex exorcisms while others simply involved the act of literally walking between two fires while being blessed by the shaman. Shamans in literature and practice were also responsible for using special stones to manipulate weather. Rituals are performed with these stones to attract rain or repel snow, cold or wind. This "rain-stone" was used for many occasions including bringing an end to drought as well as producing hailstorms as a means of warfare.[175] Despite distinctions between various types of shamans and specific traditions, there is a uniformity throughout the region manifested in the personal beliefs, objectives, rituals, symbols and the appearance of shamans.

Shamanic rituals as artistic performance

The shamanic ceremony is both a religious ceremony and an artistic performance. The fundamental purpose of the dramatic displays seen during shamanic ceremonies is not to draw attention or to create a spectacle for the audience as many Westerners have come to believe, but to lead the tribe in a solemn ritualistic process.

In general, all performances consist of four elements: dance, music, poetry and dramatic or mimetic action. The use of these elements serves the purpose of outwardly expressing his mystical communion with nature and the spirits for the rest of the tribe. The true shaman can make the journey to the spirit world at any time and any place, but shamanic ceremonies provide a way for the rest of the tribe to share in this religious experience. The shaman changes his voice mimetically to represent different persons, gods, and animals while his music and dance change to show his progress in the spirit world and his different spiritual interactions. Many shamans practice ventriloquism and make use of their ability to accurately imitate the sounds of animals, nature, humans and other noises in order to provide the audience with the ambiance of the journey. Elaborate dances and recitations of songs and poetry are used to make the shamans spiritual adventures into a matter of living reality to his audience.[176]

Costume and accessories

The shaman's attire varies throughout the region but his chief accessories are his coat, cap, and tambourine or drum. The transformation into an animal is an important aspect of the journey into the spirit world undertaken during shamanic rituals so the coat is often decorated with birds feathers and representations of animals, coloured handkerchiefs, bells and metal ornaments. The cap is usually made from the skin of a bird with the feathers and sometimes head, still attached.[177]

The drum or tambourine is the essential means of communicating with spirits and enabling the shaman to reach altered states of consciousness on his journey. The drum, representing the universe in epitome, is often divided into equal halves to represent the earth and lower realms. Symbols and natural objects are added to the drum representing natural forces and heavenly bodies.[178]

Shamanism in Tsarist and Soviet Russia

In Soviet Central Asia, the Soviet government persecuted and denounced shamans as practitioners of fraudulent medicine and perpetuators of outdated religious beliefs in the new age of science and logic. The radical transformations occurring after the October Socialist Revolution led to a sharp decrease in the activity of shamans. Shamans represented an important component in the traditional culture of Central Asians and because of their important role in society, Soviet organizations and campaigns targeted shamans in their attempt to eradicate traditional influences in the lives of the indigenous peoples. Along with persecution under the tsarist and Soviet regimes, the spread of Christianity and Islam had a role in the disintegration of native faith throughout central Asia. Poverty, political instability and foreign influence are also detrimental to a religion that requires publicity and patronage to flourish. By the 1980s most shamans were discredited in the eyes of their people by Soviet officials and physicians.[179]

Other Asian traditions

"Jhakri" is the common name used for shamans in Sikkim (India) and Nepal. They exist in the Limbu, Sunuwar, Rai, Sherpa, Kami, Tamang, Gurung and Lepcha communities.[180] They are influenced by Hinduism, Tibetan Buddhism, Mun and Bön rites.[181]

Shamanism is still widely practiced in the Ryukyu Islands (Okinawa, Japan), where shamans are known as 'Noro' (all women) and 'Yuta'. 'Noro' generally administer public or communal ceremonies while 'Yuta' focus on civil and private matters. Shamanism is also practiced in a few rural areas in Japan proper. It is commonly believed that the Shinto religion is the result of the transformation of a shamanistic tradition into a religion. Forms of practice vary somewhat in the several Ryukyu islands, so that there is, for example, a distinct **Miyako** shamanism.[182]

Shamanism practices seem to have been preserved in the Catholic religious traditions of aborigines in Taiwan.[183]

In Vietnam, shamans conduct rituals in many of the religious traditions that co-mingle in the majority and minority populations. In their rituals, music, dance, special garments and offerings are part of the performance that surround the spirit journey.[184]

Europe

Some of the prehistoric peoples who once lived in Siberia and other parts of Central and Eastern Asia have dispersed and migrated into other regions, bringing aspects of their cultures with them. For example, many Uralic peoples live now outside Siberia; however, the original location of the Proto-Uralic peoples (and its extent) is debated. Combined phytogeographical and linguistic considerations (distribution of various tree species and the presence of their names in various Uralic languages) suggest that this area was north of Central Ural Mountains and on lower and middle parts of Ob River.[185] Newer studies suggest and origin in Northeast Asia.[186] Proto-Uralic is suggested to be linked to the Chinese Liao civilization.[187] The ancestors of Hungarian people or Magyars have wandered from their ancestral proto-Uralic area to the Pannonian Basin. Shamanism has played an important role in Turko-Mongol mythology: Tengriism—the major ancient belief among Xiongnu, Mongol and Turkic peoples, Magyars and Bulgars—incorporates elements of shamanism.[188] Shamanism is no more a living practice among Hungarians, but remnants have been reserved as fragments of folklore, in folktales, customs.[189]

Some historians of the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern period have argued that traces of shamanistic traditions can be seen in the popular folk belief of this period. Most prominent among these was the Italian Carlo Ginzburg, who claimed shamanistic elements in the *benandanti* custom of 16th-century Italy,[190] the Hungarian Éva Pócs, who identified them in the *táltos* tradition of

Hungary,[191] and the Frenchman Claude Lecouteux, who has argued that Medieval traditions regarding the soul are based on earlier shamanic ideas.[192] Ginzburg in particular has argued that some of these traditions influenced the conception of witchcraft in Christendom, in particular ideas regarding the witches' sabbath, leading to the events of the witch trials in the early modern period.[193] Some of these Italian traditions survived into the 20th and early 21st centuries, allowing Italian-American sociologist Sabina Magliocco to make a brief study of them (2009).[194]

Sami shamanic drum in the Arktikum Science Museum, in Rovaniemi, Finland

Circumpolar shamanism

Inuit and Yupik cultures

Eskimo groups inhabit a huge area stretching from eastern Siberia through Alaska and Northern Canada (including Labrador Peninsula) to Greenland. Shamanistic practice and beliefs have been recorded at several parts of this vast area crosscutting continental borders.[125][68][196]

When speaking of "shamanism" in various Eskimo groups, we must remember that (as mentioned above) the term "shamanism" can cover certain characteristics of *various* different cultures.[16] Mediation is regarded often as an important aspect of shamanism in general.[197] Also in most Eskimo groups, the role of mediator is known well,[198] the person filling it in is actually believed to be able to contact the beings who populate the belief system. Term "shaman" is used in several English-language publications also in relation to Eskimos.[125][196][199][200] Also the *alignalghi* (IPA: [a'liɣnalʁi]) of the Asian Eskimos is translated as "shaman" in the Russian[201] and English[198] literature.

Yup'ik shaman exorcising evil spirits from a sick boy, Nushagak, Alaska, 1890s[195]

The belief system assumes specific links between the living people, the souls of hunted animals, and those of dead people.[202] The soul concepts of several groups are specific examples of soul dualism (showing variability in details in the various cultures).

Unlike the majority of shamanisms the careers of most Eskimo shamans lack the motivation of *force*: becoming a shaman is usually a result of deliberate consideration, not a necessity forced by the spirits.[60]

Diversity, with similarities

Another possible concern: do the belief systems of various Eskimo groups have such common features at all, that would justify any mentioning them together? There was no political structure above the groups, their languages were relative, but differed more or less, often forming language continuums.[203]

There are similarities in the cultures of the Eskimo groups[204][205][206][207][208] together with diversity, far from homogeneity.[209]

The Russian linguist Menovshikov (Меновщиков), an expert of Siberian Yupik and Sireniki Eskimo languages (while admitting that he is not a specialist in ethnology)[210] mentions, that the shamanistic seances of those Siberian Yupik and Sireniki groups he has seen have many similarities to those of Greenland Inuit groups described by Fridtjof Nansen,[211] although a large distance separates Siberia and Greenland. There may be certain similarities also in Asiatic groups with North American ones.[212] Also the usage of a specific shaman's language is documented among several Eskimo groups, used mostly for talking to spirits.[213][214] Also the Ungazighmiit (belonging to Siberian Yupiks) had a special allegoric usage of some expressions.[215]

The local cultures showed great diversity. The myths concerning the role of shaman had several variants, and also the name of their protagonists varied from culture to culture. For example, a mythological figure, usually referred to in the literature by the collective term Sea Woman, has factually many local names: Nerrivik "meat dish" among Polar Inuit, Nuliayuk "lubricous" among Netsilingmiut, Sedna "the nether one" among Baffin Land Inuit.[216] Also the soul conceptions, e.g. the details of the soul dualism showed great variability, ranging from guardianship to a kind of reincarnation. Conceptions of spirits or other beings had also many variants (see e.g. the tupilaq concept).[217]

Americas

North America

Native American and First Nations cultures have diverse religious beliefs and there was never one universal Native American religion or spiritual system. Although many Native American cultures have traditional healers, ritualists, singers, mystics, lore-keepers and medicine people, none of them ever used, or use, the term "shaman" to describe these religious leaders. Rather, like other indigenous cultures the world over, their spiritual functionaries are described by words in their own languages, and in many cases are not taught to outsiders.

Native American "conjuror" in a 1590 colonial engraving

Many of these indigenous religions have been grossly misrepresented by outside observers and anthropologists, even to the extent of superficial or seriously mistaken anthropological accounts being taken as more authentic than the accounts of actual members of the cultures and religions in question. Often these accounts suffer from "noble savage"-type romanticism and racism. Some contribute to the fallacy that Native American cultures and religions are something that only existed in the past, and which can be mined for data despite the opinions of Native communities.[218]

Not all Indigenous communities have roles for specific individuals who mediate with the spirit world on behalf of the community. Among those that do have this sort of religious structure, spiritual methods and beliefs may have some commonalities, though many of these commonalities are due to some nations being closely related, from the same region, or through post-Colonial governmental policies leading to the combining of formerly independent nations on reservations. This can sometimes lead to the impression that there is more unity among belief systems than there was in antiquity

With the arrival of European settlers and colonial administration, the practice of Native American traditional beliefs was discouraged and Christianity was imposed[219] upon the indigenous people. In most communities, the traditions were not completely eradicated, but rather went underground, and were practicedsecretly until the prohibitive laws were repealed.[220]

Up until and during the last hundred years, thousands of Native American and First Nations children from many different communities were sent into the Canadian Indian residential school system, and Indian boarding schools in an effort to destroy tribal languages, cultures and beliefs. The Trail of Tears, in the US, forced Native Americans to relocate from their traditional homes. Canadian laws enacted in 1982, and henceforth, have attempted to reverse previous attempts at extinguishing Native culture.[221]

Mesoamerica

Maya

Aztec

South America

- The Urarina of the Peruvian Amazon have an elaborate cosmological system predicated on the ritual consumption of ayahuasca, which is a key feature of their society.[222]
- Santo Daime and União do Vegetal (abbreviated to UDV) are syncretic religions with which use an entheogen called ayahuasca in an attempt to connect with the spirit realm and receive divine guidance.[61]

Maya priest performing a healing ritual at Tikal

Amazonia

In the Peruvian Amazon basin and north coastal regions of the country, the healers are known as curanderos. *Ayahuasqueros* are Peruvians who specialize in the use of ayahuasca.[222] *Ayahuasqueros* have become popular among Western spiritual seekers, who claim that the *ayauasqueros* and their ayahuasca brews have cured them of everything from depression to addiction to cancer.[61]

In addition to *curanderos* use of ayahuasca and their ritualized ingestion of mescaline-bearing San Pedro cactuses (*Trichocereus pachanoi*) for the divination and diagnosis of sorcery, north-coastal shamans are famous throughout the region for their intricately complex and symbolically dense healing altars called mesas (tables).[223] Sharon (1993) has argued that the mesas symbolize the dualistic ideology underpinning the practice and experience of north-coastal shamanism.[224] For Sharon, the mesas are the, "physical embodiment of the supernatural opposition between benevolent and malevolent energies" (Dean 1998: 61).[225]

A Shuara Shaman in Ecuador Amazonian forest, 2006

Body of Ndyuka Maroon child brought before medicine man, Suriname River, Suriname, South America

In several tribes living in the Amazon rainforest, the spiritual leaders also act as managers of scarce ecological resources.[53][55][96] The rich symbolism in Tukano culture has been documented in field works[53][226][227] even in the last decades of the 20th century

The *yaskomo* of the Waiwai is believed to be able to perform a soul flight. The soul flight can serve several functions:

- healing
- flying to the sky to consult cosmological beings (the moon or the brother of the moon) to get a name for a newborn baby
- flying to the cave of *peccaries' mountains* to ask the *father of peccaries* for abundance of game
- flying deep down in a river, to achieve the help of other beings.

Thus, a yaskomo is believed to be able to reach sky, earth, and water.[228]

Mapuche

Among the Mapuche people of Chile, *Machi* is usually a woman who serves the community by performing ceremonies to cure diseases, ward off evil, influence the weather and harvest, and by practicing other forms of healing such as herbalism.

Urarina shaman, 1988

Aymara

For the Aymara people of South America the Yatiri is a healer who heals the body and the soul, they serve the community and do the rituals for Pachamama.

Part of the healing power attributed to shamanic practices depends of the use of plant alkaloids taken during the therapeutic sessions.[229]

Fuegians

Although Fuegians (the indigenous peoples of Tierra del Fuego) were all hunter-gatherers,[230] they did not share a common culture. The material culture was not homogenous, either: the big island and the archipelago made two different adaptations possible. Some of the cultures were coast-dwelling, others were land-oriented.[231][232]

Both Selk'nam and Yámana had persons filling in shaman-like roles. The Selk'nams believed their /xon/s to have supernatural capabilities, e.g. to control weather.[233][234] The figure of /xon/ appeared in myths, too.[235] The Yámana /jekamuʃ/[236] corresponds to the Selknam/xon/.[237]

Oceania

On the island of Papua New Guinea, indigenous tribes believe that illness and calamity are caused by dark spirits, or *masalai*, which cling to a person's body and poison them. Shamans are summoned in order to purge the unwholesome spirits from a person.[238][239] Shamans also perform rainmaking ceremonies and can allegedly improve a hunter's ability to catch animals.[240]

In Australia various aboriginal groups refer to their shamans as "clever men" and "clever women" also as *kadji*. These aboriginal shamans use *maban* or *mabain*, the material that is believed to give them their purported magical powers. Besides healing, contact with spiritual beings, involvement in initiation and other secret ceremonies, they are also enforcers of tribal laws, keepers of special knowledge and may 'hex" to death one who breaks a social taboo by singing a song only known to the "clever men".

Africa

In Mali, Dogon sorcerers (both male and female) communicate with a spirit named Amma, who advises them on healing and divination practices.

The classical meaning of shaman as a person who, after recovering from a mental illness (or insanity) takes up the professional calling of socially recognized religious practitioner, is exemplified among the Sisala (of northern Gold Coast): "the fairies "seized" him and made him insane for several months. Eventually, though, he learned to control their power, which he now uses to divine."[241]

The term *sangoma*, as employed in Zulu and congeneric languages, is effectively equivalent to shaman. Sangomas are highly revered and respected in their society, where illness is thought to be caused by witchcraft,[242] pollution (contact with impure objects or occurrences), bad spirits, or the ancestors themselves,[243] either malevolently, or through neglect if they are not respected, or to show an individual her calling to become a sangoma (*thwasa*).[244] For harmony between the living and the dead, vital for a trouble-free life, the ancestors must be shown respect through ritual and animal sacrifice.[245]

The term *inyanga* also employed by the Nguni cultures is equivalent to 'herbalist' as used by the Zulu people and a variation used by the Karanga,[246] among whom remedies (locally known as muti) for ailments are discovered by the inyanga being informed in a dream, of the herb able to effect the cure and also of where that herb is to be found. The majority of the herbal knowledge base is passed down from one *inyanga* to the next, often within a particular family circle in any one village.

Shamanism is known among the Nuba of Kordofan in Sudan.[247][248]

Sangoma/Inyanga performing a traditional baptism on a baby in order to protect the spirit of the baby Johannesburg, South Africa

Contemporary Western shamanism

There is an endeavor in some contemporary occult and esoteric circles to reinvent shamanism in a modern form, often drawing from core shamanism—a set of beliefs and practices synthesized by Michael Harner—centered on the use of ritual drumming and dance, and Harner's interpretations of various indigenous religions. Harner has faced criticism for taking pieces of diverse religions out of their cultural contexts and synthesising a set of universal shamanic techniques. Some neoshamans focus on the ritual use of entheogens,[249] and also embrace the philosophies of chaos magic while others (such as Jan Fries)[250] have created their own forms of shamanism.

European-based neoshamanic traditions are focused upon the researched or imagined traditions of ancient Europe, where many mystical practices and belief systems were suppressed by the Christian church. Some of these practitioners express a desire to practice a system that is based upon their own ancestral traditions. Some anthropologists and practitioners have discussed the impact of such neoshamanism as "giving extra pay" (Harvey, 1997 and elsewhere) to indigenous American traditions, particularly as many pagan or heathen shamanic practitioners do not call themselves shamans, but instead use specific names derived from the European traditions—they work within such as *völva* or *seidkona* (seid-woman) of the sagas (see Blain 2002, Wallis 2003).

Many spiritual seekers travel to Peru to work with *ayahuasqueros*, shamans who engage in the ritual use of ayahuasca, a psychedelic tea which has been documented to cure everything from depression to addiction. When taking ayahuasca, participants frequently report meeting spirits, and receiving divine revelations.[61] Shamanistic techniques have also been used in New Age therapies which use enactment and association with other realities as an intervention.[251][252]

Criticism of the term

The anthropologist Alice Kehoe criticizes the term "shaman" in her book *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*. Part of this criticism involves the notion of cultural appropriation.[7] This includes criticism of New Age and modern Western forms of shamanism, which, according to Kehoe, misrepresent or dilute indigenous practices. Alice Kehoe also believes that the term reinforces racist ideas such as the noble savage.

A tableau presenting figures of various cultures filling in mediator-like roles, often being termed as "shaman" in the literature. The tableau presents the diversity of this concept.

Kehoe is highly critical of Mircea Eliade's work on shamanism as an invention synthesized from various sources unsupported by more direct research. To Kehoe, citing that ritualistic practices (most notably drumming, trance, chanting, entheogens and hallucinogens, spirit communication and healing) as being definitive of shamanism is poor practice. Such citations ignore the fact that those practices exist outside of what is defined as shamanism and play similar roles even in non-shamanic cultures (such as the role of chanting in Judeo-Christian and Islamic rituals) and that in their expression are unique to each culture that uses them. Such practices cannot be generalized easily, accurately, or usefully into a global religion of shamanism. Because of this, Kehoe is also highly critical of the hypothesis that shamanism is an ancient, unchanged, and survivin religion from the Paleolithic period.[7]

Anthropologist Mihály Hoppál also discusses whether the term "shamanism" is appropriate. He notes that for many readers, "-ism" implies a particular dogma, like Buddhism or Judaism. He recommends using the term "shamanhood"[253] or "shamanship"[254] (a term used in old Russian and German ethnographic reports at the beginning of the 20th century) for stressing the diversity and the specific features of the discussed cultures. He believes that this places more stress on the local variations[16] and emphasizes that shamanism is not a religion of sacred dogmas, but linked to the everyday life in a practical way.[255] Following similar thoughts, he also conjectures a contemporary paradigm shift.[253] Piers Vitebsky also mentions that, despite really astonishing similarities, there is no unity in shamanism. The various, fragmented shamanistic practices and beliefs coexist with other beliefs everywhere. There is no record of pure shamanistic societies (although, as for the past, their existence is not impossible).[256] Norwegian social anthropologist Hakan Rydving has likewise argued for the abandonment of the terms "shaman" and "shamanism" as "scientific illusions".[257]

Dulam Bumochir has affirmed the above critiques of "shamanism" as a Western construct created for comparative purposes and, in an extensive article, has documented the role of Mongols themselves, particularly "the partnership of scholars and shamans in the reconstruction of shamanism" in post-1990/post-communist Mongolia.[258] This process has also been documented by Swiss anthropologist Judith Hangartner in her landmark study of Darhad shamans in Mongolia.[259] Historian Karena Kollmar-Polenz argues that the social construction and reification of shamanism as a religious "other" actually began with the 18th-century writings of Tibetan Buddhist monks in Mongolia and later "probably influenced the formation of European discourse on Shamanism".[260]

See also

- Divine madness#Shamanism
- Folk healer
- Folk magic
- Itako
- Neoshamanism
- Neuroanthropology
- Neurotheology
- Paganism
- Plastic shaman
- Prehistoric medicine
- Seiðr
- Soul catcher
- Spirit spouse
- Tlamatini
- Zduhać

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External links

- AFECT A charitable organization protecting traditional cultures in northern Thailand
- Chuonnasuan (Meng Jin Fu), The Last Shaman of the Oroqen of Northeast China, by Richard Noll and Kun Shi
- New Age Frauds and Plastic Shamans, an organization devoted to alerting seekers about fraudulent teachers, and helping them avoid being exploited or participating in exploitation
- Shamanic Healing Rituals by Tatyana Sem, Russian Museum of Ethnography
- Shamanism and the Image of the Teutonic Deity, Óðinn by A. Asbjorn Jon
- Shamanism in Siberia – photographs by Standa Krupar

- Studies in Siberian Shamanism and Religions of the Finno-Ugrian Peoples by Aado Lintrop, Folk Belief and Media Group of the Estonian Literary Museum
- A View from the Headwaters by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples and ecology
- Samgaldai NGO – A charitable, non-for-profit NGO for preserving Mongolian traditional Shamanic practices and rituals, operating in Mongolia.

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